

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 26  
Number 4 *Parameters Winter 1996*

Article 2

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11-7-1996

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### Recommended Citation

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# Presidential Decisionmaking and Vietnam: Lessons for Strategists

JOSEPH R. CERAMI

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From *Parameters*, Winter 1996-97, pp. 66-80.

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"Looking back, I clearly erred by not forcing . . . a knock-down, drag-out debate over the loose assumptions, unasked questions, and thin analyses underlying our military strategy in Vietnam. I had spent twenty years as a manager identifying problems and forcing organizations--often against their will--to think deeply and realistically about alternative courses of action and their consequences. I doubt I will ever fully understand why I did not do so here." -- Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect*[1]

"Even after twenty years, the American public debate [on Vietnam] has not attained an objective perspective and still seems more eager to assign blame than to draw lessons from the experience." -- Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*[2]

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Does the large body of material on the lessons of Vietnam contain useful insights for armed interventions and coercive diplomacy? Richard Goodwin, a speechwriter for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, cautions: "History is an enigmatic teacher, a trickster whose only certain lesson is that the future cannot count on the past, and that what has 'always' been true may become irrevocably false." [3] General Dave Palmer, however, encourages us to study history to learn lessons, aid judgment, and try to avoid future mistakes: "We did many things right in Vietnam. And many wrong. Those lessons must not be lost. The errors must not be ignored--to be repeated." [4] So while it may be a perilous undertaking, we do need to study the historical record if we are to contribute to contemporary debates about the appropriate ends, ways, and means of national security policy and the (often) associated uses of armed force in pursuit of strategic objectives.

This article examines presidential use of military force to attain specific policy objectives in the context of the conflict in Vietnam. The cases selected occurred at major decision points during the war: Operation Rolling Thunder in 1965, the Cambodian Invasion in 1970, and the Easter Offensive and Operation Linebacker in 1972. Each case examines the decisionmaker's capacity for strategic learning--for understanding and applying the lessons of things done right and wrong. The cases also illustrate the effects that individual approaches to strategy, policymaking, and decisionmaking can have on the outcome of such initiatives. Finally, the military means in each case were different; consequently, each case provides its own particular insights into the relative utility of air, ground, and sea power as means to pursue national policy objectives in a complex political setting.

## 1965: Rolling Thunder

The Rolling Thunder air campaign ran its course from February 1965 until March 1968. Because President Johnson had avoided escalating military actions until after the 1964 elections, significant US ground forces would not enter the conflict until July 1965, even though the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, had been operating in Southeast Asia since 1955. [5] By January 1965, however, Johnson was under mounting pressure from his closest national security advisors to "do something" in response to the increasing level of attacks against US and South Vietnamese personnel and installations.

In December 1964, the Viet Cong had demonstrated their capabilities and the weakness of the South's Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN) forces by conducting a successful operation around the village of Binh Gia, an area close to Saigon. On Christmas eve a terrorist bomb in the Brinks Hotel in Saigon killed several American personnel. [6] In February 1965 there were additional attacks against Camp Holloway and the Pleiku Airfield, along with another bombing of a US hotel in Qui Nhon, where 23 US advisors were killed. [7] The means chosen for retaliating against

these escalatory attacks was the selective and highly restricted use of B-52 strikes south of the 19th parallel in North Vietnam.[8]

The strategic objective, expressed as denying the North Vietnamese victory in the South, was spelled out in a Memorandum for the President written by Secretary of Defense McNamara: "Our objective is to create conditions for a favorable settlement by demonstrating to the VC/DRV [Viet Cong/ Democratic Republic of Vietnam] that the odds are against their winning." [9] The consensus among Administration policymakers was that the strategic objective was to compel the North to stop its aggressive actions against South Vietnam.[10]

As Johnson and his advisors reviewed various options, three general alternative approaches emerged.[11] Doves, led by George Ball, cautioned about the difficulties in "dismounting from the tiger's back" after escalating the US military involvement in the conflict. The hawks, who reflected the thinking of Walt Rostow, urged a combination of air and ground power to counter the North's aggression. William Bundy suggested a way to achieve maximum results with minimum risks. Interagency working groups had defined the three options in November 1964:

1. Continue a policy of moderation--continue Operation A, covert military actions against the North, while supporting the development of South Vietnamese political stability and military forces.
2. Launch bold attacks against the North--including an aggressive air campaign against the North and introducing US combat battalions in the South.
3. Gradually increase the use of military force--first with air attacks against supply lines in Laos and then escalating to strikes in North Vietnam.[12]

Option 3, perceived as a middle ground between the hawks and doves, was endorsed by the President. The concept was to exert gradual military pressure on the North for three immediate purposes: psychological satisfaction, in retaliating for the attacks in the South; strategic persuasion, to get the North to cease aggressive acts and begin negotiating for peace; and defensive reasons, to impede the flow of reinforcements and supplies into the South.[13] Two camps emerged regarding the conduct of the campaign. The political advisors, including Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton, favored a graduated response, employing bombing on a tit-for-tat basis, while the military and intelligence communities favored hitting North Vietnam hard and fast in a "knockout punch." [14]

Johnson's choice of options--labeled the "progressive squeeze"[15]--led to a sense of exasperation and helplessness as he surveyed his options for influencing events in Vietnam. In a conversation with his assistant Bill Moyers, Johnson compared his predicament to that of a Texas hitchhiker caught in a hailstorm: "I can't run. I can't hide. And I can't make it stop." [16] Nevertheless, given the mounting pressure for action against the increasingly aggressive Viet Cong, on 1 December 1964 President Johnson agreed to the policy of graduated response in spite of his own reservations about the potential success of an air campaign against the North.[17] "Every time I get a military recommendation," Johnson wrote in a cable to Ambassador Maxwell Taylor in December 1964, "it seems to me that it calls for a large-scale bombing. I have never felt that this war will be won from the air." [18] Rather than follow his instincts, or demand another round of policy options from his advisors, the President yielded to the demands for action.[19]

During this air campaign the White House maintained tight control of all phases of the operation. Johnson's frequently quoted remark about the military's not being able to bomb an outhouse in North Vietnam without his permission aptly captures the degree of civilian control over the Rolling Thunder operations. In the words of one historian, "the policy-makers did everything but fly the aircraft." [20] Yet the Johnson Administration's attempt at a graduated response to aggression by using air power failed.

By starting slowly and increasing pressure by "precise increments which could be unmistakably recognized in Hanoi," the progressive, slow-squeeze option succeeded only in preventing the attainment of US strategic objectives. In fact, these halfhearted attempts at using air power bolstered the enemy's resolve. The bombings led to a resurgence of North Vietnamese national support for the communist government, as reported in a State Department Intelligence Note in June of 1965.[21] Furthermore, the restrictive campaign of hitting transportation terminals and military installations was truly an "ineffective application of power." [22] Rather than reducing the flow of supplies during a five-day pause after two months of bombing, the North Vietnamese clearly signaled their intentions to Johnson by increasing the flow

of equipment and men to the South.[23]

Top strategists within the Administration noted the ineffectiveness of the air campaign. Their conclusion was expressed by General Earle G. Wheeler, the JCS Chairman, in a memorandum for Secretary McNamara in April of 1965. The February-April bombings, he wrote, had not appreciably reduced "the overall military capability of the DRV. . . . I think it is fair to state that our strikes to date, while damaging, have not curtailed DRV military capabilities in any major way." [24] General Westmoreland echoed these conclusions in August 1966, and they were repeated yet again in 1967 by Secretary McNamara.[25]

Rolling Thunder failed to bring the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table, failed to impede the flow of logistics support from the North, and failed to weaken the North's resolve.[26] The air campaign did demonstrate US support for the government of South Vietnam and the US desire to contain communist expansion. However, ultimately it raised the ante, but for the United States rather than for North Vietnam, because it contributed to the decisions that sent US ground troops to Vietnam. In the next attempt at coercion the President directed using land power to support a policy decision.

### **1970: The Cambodian Invasion**

In 1968, the United States began shifting course toward the policy of Vietnamization; the term refers to both the program and goal of US policy for improving and modernizing the South Vietnamese armed forces.[27] President Nixon accelerated the program, originally started under Defense Secretary Clark Clifford, to shift the burden of fighting the war to the South Vietnamese. Under the Nixon Doctrine, "The US role in Third World conflicts would be transformed from one of direct participation to one of serving as trainer and supplier to indigenous forces." [28]

At the same time, the situation in Cambodia was deteriorating rapidly. In early 1969, Prince Sihanouk had secretly permitted the American bombing of North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia.[29] In March 1970, Lon Nol deposed Sihanouk, resulting in a Cambodian civil war. Lon Nol and the Cambodian army fought the North Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge communists in an extension of Lon Nol's earlier efforts, while prime minister, to support US efforts to remove the North Vietnamese from their Cambodian border sanctuaries. President Nixon was interested in making a symbolic gesture in support of the new pro-US Cambodian leader.[30]

The military situation in South Vietnam also contributed to the decision to use ground forces across the Cambodian border. The 14 major North Vietnamese army (NVA) base camps in Cambodia, within 35 miles of Saigon, constituted a "loaded and cocked pistol . . . held to the head of South Vietnam." [31] Clearing the base camps would provide some breathing room for the government in Saigon.

There were three major objectives for using ground forces in a cross-border operation:

- Demonstrate to the North Vietnamese the United States' continuing commitment to the government of South Vietnam, and encourage North Vietnam to compromise at the conference table.
- Save the government of Lon Nol in Cambodia.
- Buy time for the continuation of the Vietnamization process and the withdrawal of US ground forces, while removing the most serious military threat facing South Vietnam and the remaining US ground forces.[32]

As opposed to Lyndon Johnson's approach of having his advisors provide the initiative for policy options, Richard Nixon made his own decisions, usually after consulting with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and his inner circle of cabinet members. In his memoirs Nixon noted the opposition of several key cabinet members, including Defense Secretary Melvin Laird. "I reached my decision. We would go for broke. The ARVN would go into the Parrot's Beak and a joint ARVN-US force would go into the Fishhook." [33]

Nixon analyzed the situation and selected the policy option, as well as the operational method for implementing the policy. He wanted to help the anti-communist, Lon Nol. He wanted to give the ARVN a chance to build its confidence by conducting its own major operation, and he wanted to protect remaining US forces and buy time for Vietnamization.[34] Operating in his solitary manner, he even left out the Defense Department, and noted that Laird was upset by the "apparent snub of the Pentagon in [the] decisionmaking process." [35] General Bruce Palmer, then

Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, later wrote:

The JCS played a minimal role in the Cambodian operation, which was conceived in the White House and planned and executed in the theater of operations. Both Secretaries Laird and [William] Rogers generally were opposed to such operations, especially if US troops were employed, but Nixon was determined to make the move. . . . In Vietnam the orders to invade Cambodia hit US field commanders with little warning and little time to plan.[36]

The Cambodian incursion, Operation Toan Thang 43, has been described as a "lightning stroke" based on the concept of mobility. The US 1st Cavalry Division, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, and 25th Infantry Division, along with several ARVN units, engaged in operations for two months, beginning in May 1970.[37] The results were mixed. The Cambodian incursion was successful in fulfilling Nixon's political objectives, but only at the tactical and, arguably, operational levels--not at the strategic level, where truly decisive results occur.

Nixon's memoir stresses the positive aspects of the operation. In fact, he wrote that "this had been the most successful operation of the Vietnam War." [38] Nixon recorded that the operation destroyed the enemy bases, bought time for Vietnamization, frustrated the North's potential for a spring offensive, and permitted the survival of the Lon Nol regime; he also wrote that after the incursion, Kissinger, on meeting the North Vietnamese negotiators, found the "friendliest atmosphere of any of the sessions so far." [39] Nixon felt that his decision to conduct the ground attacks into Cambodia resulted in a significant success, especially in stimulating the negotiating process.

In the view of historian and Army general Dave Palmer, Operation Toan Thang 43 successfully met three of the political objectives: lowering future allied losses; permitting the continued withdrawal of US forces; and enhancing Vietnamization. However, it failed to move the North Vietnamese toward a negotiated settlement.[40] Another Army general, Bruce Palmer, is more critical of the incursion because of several operational problems. The South, with its territorially based ARVN units, was unable to shift forces to the north to counter the move of the Cambodian-based forces closer to North Vietnam. In addition, the move forced the North to improve the Ho Chi Minh trail after losing the Cambodian sanctuaries. On the plus side, he notes that the North Vietnamese were forced to leave an area from which they directly threatened the Saigon government. He also praised the performance of the ARVN forces and the seeming initial success in the progress of Vietnamization.

However, while praising the operation's short-term gains, Bruce Palmer saw the Cambodian incursion as a "major turning point of the war" which "fatally wounded South Vietnam's chances to survive and remain free." [41] Most importantly, Toan Thang 43 proved to be a domestic political disaster in the United States. The operation boomeranged by producing a hostile congressional reaction and the subsequent reduction of funds for the war effort.[42] To better evaluate the effects of the 1970 Cambodian operation, it is helpful to consider it in a broader context, in the events that unfolded in 1972.

### **1972: The Easter Offensive and Operation Linebacker**

President Nixon again chose to use military means to achieve political ends in May 1972. North Vietnam had been receiving large shipments of military equipment from the Soviet Union and China. Estimates were that in 1971 alone, Soviet ships had delivered a million tons of cargo to North Vietnam, including heavy artillery and tanks.[43] Thus equipped, the North Vietnamese had launched a major "armor-tipped blitzkrieg"--the Easter Offensive--across the 17th parallel in March 1972.[44] "Hundreds of medium tanks and armored personnel carriers poured across the DMZ [demilitarized zone], supported by heavy artillery, rockets, and modern mobile antiaircraft weapons, including some surface-to-air missiles--all supplied by the Soviet Union." [45]

The North could reasonably expect a win/win situation resulting from its offensive. In the best case, there was the possibility of a complete collapse of the ARVN in the face of a surprise main force invasion across the weakly held northern border. Even if a military victory was not possible immediately, there were certain short-term benefits in the march toward the goal of reunification. North Vietnam's strategist, General Giap, at least could be confident of giving the South a bloody nose, if not a knockout blow, while capturing some southern territory and thereby discrediting the Vietnamization program.

On the political level, the North expected that in an election year--as during the Tet offensive in 1968--the US President would be extremely vulnerable to domestic pressures for ending the war.[46] At the same time, it was public knowledge that Kissinger had been hard at work on détente with the Soviets, even while pursuing peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese leaders must have calculated that the United States might hesitate to take any actions that could impede the ongoing strategic arms control talks. Nixon's strong response to the spring offensive surprised both the Soviet and North Vietnamese leaders; he was not about to allow the North Vietnamese to use the "leverage of American presidential politics" as they had with the 1968 Tet offensive.[47]

Nixon's political objectives were clear. In the arena of great-power politics, he felt obliged to show the Soviet Union's leaders that they would not be able to influence events in the Third World through the force of arms. He thought that any sign of US weakness in the face of the Easter Offensive would be a signal to the Soviets to increase their support for the North. The President also wanted to maintain his commitment to support the South Vietnamese government and armed forces. Nixon and Kissinger accused the North Vietnamese negotiators of playing a "cynical game with the peace talks in Paris" and sought to impress upon them the President's willingness to use force in the pursuit of US goals.[48] Therefore, Nixon decided to signal his willingness to use military force in a clear, violent, and comprehensive manner. The result was Operation Linebacker, and it was as hard-hitting as the football image the name was intended to project.

The purpose of Linebacker was to destroy the ability of the NVA to continue its attack into the territory of the South. Its operational objectives included:

- Destroy war-related industry and support infrastructure in North Vietnam.
- Cut off the external supplies being shipped into the port of Haiphong, as well as those arriving by rail from China.
- Destroy the North's internal transportation system.[49]

Nixon felt he had to demonstrate--to the Soviets, to the North Vietnamese, and to the South Vietnamese--the credibility of the US commitment to the government of South Vietnam. Stanley Karnow writes that Nixon's use of force served "dual psychological purposes," first in reassuring South Vietnamese President Thieu and second in showing the communists "that he was ready to bomb North Vietnam if they violated an eventual settlement." [50]

As in the Cambodian incursion, according to his memoirs, Nixon alone decided on the course of action to follow. Again, cabinet officers opposed him and he knew there would be a strong domestic reaction. Nevertheless, in Nixon's words, "Defeat . . . was not an option." [51] On 5 May 1972, B-52 bombers conducted raids against Hanoi and Haiphong, and on 8 May the US Navy mined the port of Haiphong. [52]

The President had decided to go all out in using air and sea power against the North in retaliation for their offensive. In his memoir, Nixon recalls a memorandum to Kissinger in which he criticized both the Pentagon and his predecessor for not understanding the use of violent means to attain policy objectives:

The reticence of the military planners continued to be a problem. The bombing proposals sent to me by the Pentagon could at best be described as timid. As I wrote in a long memorandum to Kissinger, "I am concerned by the military's plan of allocating 200 sorties for North Vietnam for the dreary 'milk runs' which characterized the Johnson's Administration's bombing in the 1965-68 period. . . . Our greatest failure now would be to do too little too late. . . . What all of us must have in mind is that we must punish the enemy in ways that he will really hurt at this time. . . . We have the power to destroy his war-making capacity. The only question is whether we have the will to use that power. What distinguishes me from Johnson is that I have the will in spades." [53]

Dave Palmer applauds Nixon for his aggressiveness and writes: "Linebacker was not Rolling Thunder--it was war." [54] In commenting on the mining operation, Bruce Palmer remarks that the "7th Fleet executed the mine-laying order in a well planned and beautifully conducted operation which took less than one hour." [55] The decisive use of sea and air power in combination with operations by ARVN ground forces successfully halted the NVA's Easter Offensive. To summarize the campaign: In April the communists advanced; in May, as a result of Linebacker, an equilibrium was reached; by June the ARVN counterattacked; and, in July, Paris peace negotiations resumed. [56]

Bruce Palmer writes that it was only when their "Easter 1972 offensive ran out of steam that the North Vietnamese finally indicated they were ready to make a political settlement." [57] Even Nixon critic Karnow acknowledges the effectiveness of Linebacker:

They [the North Vietnamese] had not crushed the United States and its South Vietnamese allies in a showdown battle, as they had beaten the French force at Dienbienphu; thus they were in no position to dictate the peace. . . . They decided to compromise. . . . Despite their cries of outrage against Nixon, the North Vietnamese had promptly resumed their talks with Kissinger. [58]

Later, when the peace talks stalled once again, Nixon demonstrated his willingness to use force in the Christmas bombings of 1972. Operation Linebacker 2, the heaviest bombing of the war, led to the final cease-fire agreement on 29 January 1973. [59] Dave Palmer again applauded Nixon's action, calling it "a classic example of the overwhelming use of military might to achieve a political end quickly." [60]

Historian Earl Tilford's insights into the air war in Vietnam offer a balanced appraisal of the reality and legacy of Linebacker 2, one that lies between the myths that have grown on both ends of the ideological spectrum. In *Crosswinds*, he writes:

The "Eleven-Day War" became shrouded in myth and the subject of controversy. Within the Air Force in the post-Vietnam Era, it was an article of faith that Linebacker Two had "brought Hanoi to its knees." Simultaneously, "the Christmas bombing" gained near iconic status in anti-war theology, especially among those who would hold that it constituted "another Dresden." Both interpretations are wrong. . . . Linebacker Two's contribution was much more in accordance with traditional concepts of strategic bombing--it had a psychological impact on Hanoi's leadership. That, coupled with the destruction of North Vietnam's air defense system, finally compelled a return to meaningful peace negotiations. [61]

Thus it seemed that by 1972 a US President had discovered a formula for achieving his aims in the war in Vietnam. Henry Kissinger cites a combination of measures that had caused North Vietnam to reverse its negotiating position and accept the US terms for a settlement. He lists the depletion of supplies caused by the mining of Haiphong Harbor, the attacks on Cambodian and Laotian sanctuaries in 1970 and 1971, the North's defeat in the spring 1972 offensive, the lack of political support from Moscow and Beijing, and the fear of Nixon's reelection leading to a showdown. [62] However, in the final analysis, the short-term operational and tactical gains brought about by the high-intensity bombing, coupled with the use of ground and naval military forces, served only to shorten the negotiations process. They certainly did not win the war, or even end the conflict on favorable terms for the United States or for South Vietnam.

### **Learning: Past, Present, and Future**

A review of the three cases discussed in this article suggests several considerations when evaluating the appropriate uses of military force for achieving specific political ends. Continuity of our experience from Vietnam to Bosnia--or to any involvement in one of the world trouble spots--should form part of our collective consciousness. As one observer noted:

The first task of rethinking American strategy after the Cold War, then, is to develop a healthy mistrust of the shibboleths and folk wisdom of the American national-security debate. . . . This requires no small effort; most American policy analysts and decision-makers have little interest in serious study of our history, and too few military historians think they have much to contribute to an understanding of our present and future. [63]

Strategists will be challenged--as they should be--to ensure that the "shibboleths and folk wisdom" surrounding the use of military force in Vietnam do not distort our capacity to reason from first principles. We must rely on our understanding of the war in Vietnam to ensure that relevant lessons are used wisely to sharpen our decisionmaking skills, present and future, and that others can be identified for the shibboleths they are.

In the first instance--in 1965--policymakers were unable to connect the means employed to the desired outcomes of their decisions. Johnson and his advisors had correctly identified a vital condition for success: blunting the will of the communist leaders in the North. Rolling Thunder, a limited application of air power, attacked symbolically the perceived strategic center of gravity--North Vietnam's determination to achieve unification--but the campaign neither defeated nor significantly damaged the enemy's will to fight for total victory. Despite the history of French involvement in the region, or perhaps in ignorance of it, key US policymakers consistently underestimated their opponents. When North Vietnam failed to act in predictable ways, the United States became frustrated and applied increasing "pressure"; Johnson's description of the Texas hitchhiker became a self-fulfilling prophecy for his policy.

The assumptions behind the policies of "gradualism" and "incrementalism"--that bombing would inflict an escalating level of pain on Ho Chi Minh and his followers and subject both the North Vietnamese people and infrastructure to punishment that would make it unthinkable to allow the war to continue--proved false. Whatever pain it caused, this increasing pressure never brought the North Vietnamese leadership to a physical or psychological breaking point.[64] The key decisions of US policymakers in 1965 were made in apparent ignorance of both the will and capability of the adversary.

Limited success later--in 1970 and 1972--reflected Nixon's skills in linking military and political objectives. Although admittedly coming at a later stage of US involvement, his reasoning and decisions proved better in the short term than those of Johnson and his advisors. Nixon was able to gain the initiative in Cambodia in 1970, and he apparently surprised the North Vietnamese with his stunning use of force in 1972. Nevertheless, while Nixon's approach to using bombing to signal and punish may have expedited the negotiating process and achieved the objective of forcing a "peace" treaty, it did not lead to either political or military victory for the United States or its South Vietnamese allies.

That said, in 1970 and 1972 the "theater-strategic" objectives were clear and limited success followed, in part because the military objectives selected were attainable in the short term. In 1970, the objective was to eject enemy forces from a specific area to gain time for Vietnamization, while in 1972 the intent was to halt an enemy offensive that employed conventional methods and materiel. Each theater-strategic objective could then be translated into appropriate military objectives, which in turn called for using appropriate military means.

Land power was the deciding factor in the limited successes of 1970 and 1972. To defeat an adversary's conventional ground forces it was necessary to use similar ground forces against them. This conclusion did not require the use of US troop units; rather, it was American advisors, fighting alongside the ARVN and securing and controlling air support, who made a significant difference in the outcome. Part of the strength of the United States in the successful cases was in the employment of advanced technologies, such as smart bombs and mines. Consequently, the much-maligned ground forces of South Vietnam, with their US advisors and the support of US air and sea power, were able to halt a massive attack by the more highly regarded forces of North Vietnam. "Persuaded" to return to the negotiating table, the North ultimately signed a treaty.

The strategist must continually create conditions that will synchronize actions in time, space, and purpose. This was a notable failure in Vietnam, where we seemed consistently unable to link successes at the operational, theater-strategic, and strategic levels. Although Johnson's advisors had long debated the entry of US ground forces, they made no attempt to combine for strategic value the effects of bombing the North and the entry of American troops in the South. These policies were managed as separate phenomena.

Nor was Nixon able to turn the short-term gains of 1970 and 1972 into a coherent long-term strategy. Despite local operational and theater-strategic success, growing domestic and legislative opposition to the war itself, as well as opposition within his own circle of advisors, denied Nixon the strategic objective he sought.[65] Ultimately, the Congress ended US advisory efforts and the use of US air and sea power in support of the South Vietnamese. As well as any American President ever had, Nixon understood the communists and had an ability for matching military means with short-term theater-strategic and operational ends. He used these skills to win battles and campaigns, but lost the struggle to control US strategic options in the region.

*Bosnia*

From our post-Gulf War perspective, the idea of a one-dimensional analysis of strategic options seems simplistic--almost absurd. But in the search for answers prior to Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke's diplomatic initiative, the advocates of bombing as the shortest route to a Bosnian settlement were vocal and certain. Columnists and politicians regularly proposed bombing as the answer, the coercion of choice for resolving the Bosnia conflict. Anthony Lewis, writing in *The New York Times*, praised the comments of Margaret Thatcher:

She called for bombing of Serbian forces and supplies in 1991, when the Serbs attacked cities in Croatia. She took the same position when they began their genocide of Muslims in Bosnia. If her advice had been followed in the first place, the aggression would have ended before the Bosnian tragedy.[66]

The urge to do something quick, decisive, and "surgical" in Bosnia, and most recently in Iraq, has parallels to our earlier experience in Vietnam. In each conflict the same craving for action led to similar attempts to find simple solutions to complex problems. Bomb to signal our will. Bomb to punish our enemies. Bomb to encourage our allies. Bomb even to silence domestic critics.

Contradictory conclusions about the effectiveness of the Bosnian bombing in hastening the peace process continue to distort our strategic learning. In a television interview on the occasion of his departure as Assistant Secretary of State, Holbrooke said: "One of the great things that people should have learned from this is that there are times when air power--not backed up by ground troops--can make a difference. That's something that our European allies didn't all agree with; Americans were in doubt on it; it made a difference." [67] Perhaps. The limited bombings might have made a difference, but who will claim that they brought the Serbs to the negotiating table?

*New York Times* columnist A. M. Rosenthal has drawn a different lesson regarding the likely result of the limited application of air power in Bosnia. He writes: "Americans can learn that the use of air power leads to the use of ground power. Believe that--not politicians, military men, or journalistic bombardiers who assure you otherwise." [68] Rosenthal's lesson is one that we should have learned from the Vietnam experience. Events subsequent to the bombing, including the departure of the UN peacekeepers and the massive introduction of ground combat forces, with the long-denied participation of US soldiers, bear him out. [69]

From a historical perspective, the ink is barely dry on the Dayton Agreement. Yet strategists should already be searching for the reasons for its success (at least in the short term) and asking why a negotiated settlement was not possible sooner. Might the various ethnic groups have moved more readily toward a settlement if the UN had established UNPROFOR I under Chapter VII rather than Chapter VI? How might the more robust capability of a Chapter VII force have affected ethnic cleansing--overt or covert--apparently carried out by all parties to the conflict? Did the aggressive use of NATO air power against the Serbs really drive them to the negotiating table, or had war-weariness finally set in? Was the Croatian ground offensive in the Krajina needed to create the conditions for negotiations? What were the strategic calculations of the various decisionmakers in Belgrade, Zagreb, Pale, and Sarajevo? What part did Russia play in the Serbian decision? Answers to such questions may be linked in ways not yet apparent; none of them should be used to support a simplistic explanation of strategic cause and effect.

The lessons we can derive from our Vietnam experience are useful when we find ourselves considering armed intervention. Analysis based on ends, ways, and means, with links to all three from the instruments of national power--military, diplomatic, economic, and informational--remain the baseline for developing executable and enduring strategic policy options. The same methodology applies when assessing the utility and limits of the land, sea, air, and space components of military power in carrying out the policies. We remain less than proficient at gauging the will and intent of our adversaries, as recent events in Iraq have demonstrated. [70] Finally--perhaps the single most important lesson from the Vietnam experience--Congress and the American people must be included in the conduct of our foreign and defense policies and strategies. These simple propositions will not answer specific questions of strategy or policy. They may, however, provide a basis for asking the right questions as we continue to shape coherent strategy and policy in a very complex national security environment.

The events of the recent past in Bosnia suggest that it is no wiser today than it was in the 1960s to presume that short-term diplomatic efforts, even when coupled with an intensive burst of bombing or other military action, will lead to "solutions" to complex human problems. Strategists would do well to learn from Robert McNamara's experience in the

failure in Vietnam: challenge assumptions and think long and hard about such matters as US history, the history of the region, the adversary's intent and values, and the interests of our allies and friends as we consider alternative courses of action and their possible consequences.

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## NOTES

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8. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
9. Memorandum reprinted in Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), p. 179.
10. Karnow, 403. Karnow and others point out that the thrust of the many interagency meetings during this period was to decide what to do without reassessing the nature of US national interests or defining success.
11. These three positions are summarized from Karnow, pp. 397-405.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 404.
13. Dave Palmer, p. 73.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
15. Berman, p. 34.
16. Karnow, p. 397.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 406.
18. Berman, pp. 34-35.
19. The operational implementation of the air campaign proceeded in three phases. Phase one was Operation Barrel Roll, the secret bombing of infiltration routes in Laos. This was followed by Operation Flaming Dart, initiated in retaliation for the February 1965 attack on the Pleiku air base. Rolling Thunder began on 2 March and included a three-year bombing program. Summarized from Karnow, pp. 401-13.
20. Dave Palmer, p. 79.
21. Berman, p. 51.
22. Dave Palmer, p. 77.

23. Ibid., p. 78.

24. Berman, p. 52.

25. Karnow, p. 454.

26. The reasons for the continuation of the air campaign are discussed in detail in the James Thompson's book, *Rolling Thunder: Understanding Policy and Program Failure* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980), where he analyzes the organizational and bureaucratic reasons for the three year continuation of this policy failure. The bombing continued as part of a broader military policy, which by July 1965 included the introduction of ground forces.

27. Summary from Collins, p. 86.

28. Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), p. 251.

29. Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Warner Books, 1978), I, 472.

30. Karnow, pp. 607-08.

31. Dave Palmer, p. 229.

32. Summary from Karnow, p. 607, and Dave Palmer, p. 237.

33. Nixon, I, 557.

34. Henry Kissinger describes Vietnamization as: the "altered military strategy which within South Vietnam, would concentrate on defending heavily populated areas while at the same time seeking to destroy Hanoi's supply routes by interdicting the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, clearing out the base areas in Cambodia, and mining the harbors of North Vietnam." The objectives were to reduce US casualties, give the ARVN the wherewithal to defend themselves and an opportunity for the Saigon government to stand on its own, and provide incentives for the North to negotiate. Kissinger, pp. 680-81.

35. Nixon, I, 557.

36. Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), p. 100.

37. Dave Palmer, p. 232.

38. Nixon, I, 578.

39. Ibid., I, 579.

40. Dave Palmer, p. 237.

41. Summary of Bruce Palmer, p. 103.

42. Ibid., pp. 103-04.

43. Ibid., p. 248.

44. Dave Palmer, p. 250.

45. Bruce Palmer, p. 120.

46. Summary from Dave Palmer, pp. 245-46.

47. Ibid., p. 245.
48. Summary from Nixon, II, 61-62.
49. Earl H. Tilford, Jr., *Crosswinds: The Air Force's Setup in Vietnam* (College Station: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 1993), p. 149.
50. Karnow, pp. 643-44.
51. Nixon, II, 62.
52. Karnow, p. 645.
53. Nixon, II, 85-86.
54. Dave Palmer, p. 252.
55. Bruce Palmer, p. 122.
56. Dave Palmer, p. 254.
57. Bruce Palmer, p. 119.
58. Karnow, p. 647.
59. Bruce Palmer, p. 129.
60. Dave Palmer, p. 259.
61. Tilford, p. 170.
62. Kissinger, p. 692.
63. Eliot A. Cohen, "What To Do About National Defense," *Commentary*, 98 (November 1994), 22.
64. The Army's dissatisfaction with "incrementalism" is recorded in many sources. For instance, see Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), p. 97. See also Colin L. Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 149. Powell writes passionately: "Many of my generation . . . vowed that when our turn came to call the shots, we would not quietly acquiesce in halfhearted warfare for half-baked reasons that the American people could not understand or support." The Vietnam War's effect on the generation of junior officers from all services is highlighted in James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).
65. In *Inner Visions*, p. 312, Alexander Haig writes about Nixon in December of 1972: "In regard to Vietnam policy, the President was under attack by Congress, under moral examination by the media, isolated from his own Cabinet, estranged from his closet adviser [Kissinger]."
66. Anthony Lewis, "Abroad at Home: Words, Words, Words," *The New York Times*, 9 May 1994, p. A17.
67. Richard Holbrooke, "Making Peace," Online Backgrounders, 21 February 1996, Transcript: Online News Hour: Newsmaker interview with Richard Holbrooke, [http://web-cr01.pbs.org/newshour/bb/bosnia/holbrooke\\_2-21.html](http://web-cr01.pbs.org/newshour/bb/bosnia/holbrooke_2-21.html).
68. A. M. Rosenthal, "The Missing Report," *The New York Times*, 22 December 1995, p. 39.
69. Steven Erlanger, "7,500 G.I.'s Staying in Bosnia to Next Spring, Perry Says," *The New York Times*, 4 October 1996, pp. 1, 10. For a policy analysis of the implications of extending US participation in the Implementation Force

(IFOR), see William T. Johnsen, *U.S. Participation in IFOR: A Marathon, Not a Sprint* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1996).

70. R. Jeffrey Smith, "Iraq Stronger Since August, Deutch Says," *The Washington Post*, 20 September 1996, p. 1. Also, see Paul Wolfowitz, "Clinton's Bay of Pigs," *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 September 1996, p. 1, 18. Wolfowitz criticizes the Administration's "pinprick" bombing attacks.

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